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Patricide: How Young Leaders Mistreat Their Predecessors

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By definition, leaders are authority figures and, as such, stand in for one's father, especially in patriarchal and traditionalist societies. Old-school psychoanalysts would tell you that such substitution is bound to provoke one's latent Oedipal complex and proclivity for patricide, whether actual (in the form of an assassination) or symbolic (in the form of dissent and disdainful criticism). Young, emerging leaders more often than not treat their predecessors this way: as hated parent-figures. This is especially true when the new or young leader's childhood has been marked by the traumas wrought on by an absent, or an abusive father.

This pernicious undercurrent often mixes unsettlingly with virulent envy, the outcome of deep-seated feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The less self-regulated the new or young leader's sense of self-worth, the more he resorts to narcissistic defenses and the more he compulsively seeks narcissistic supply (attention, adulation) to buttress his precariously-balanced personality. Narcissism is frequently tinged with sadism and passive-aggressive behaviors: taunting the older or previous leader, publicly humiliating him or her, thus showing him/her "who is boss". The more successful the new or young leader is at defeating or subjugating his predecessors, the more it supports his belief in his own omnipotence, omniscience, and cosmic-messianic sense of mission.

Every manner of psychological defense mechanism is provoked in the young leader: denial (of the inappropriateness, impudence, and immorality of his actions); devaluation (of the older leadership, thus justifying their mistreatment); displacement (scapegoating the previous leaders for one's own predicament and failures); fantasy (evading reality by constructing elaborate grandiose narratives and confabulations); idealization (of the nation, for instance, or of one's own coterie or political party); omnipotence; projection (attributing to the former leaders one's own faults, frailties, and shortcomings); projective identification (provoking the older leaders into action that is unseemly or against their best interests); rationalization and intellectualization (of one's misconduct and misdeeds); splitting (casting the older, erstwhile leaders as evil, corrupt, and incompetent while attributing to oneself all the positive traits).

The narcissistic or psychopathic leader is the culmination and reification of his period, culture, and civilization. He is likely to rise to prominence in narcissistic societies. The leader's mental health pathologies resonate with the anomy of his society and culture ("psychopathological resonance"). The leader and the led form a self-enhancing and self-reinforcing feedback loop, a dyad of mirrored adoration and reflected love. By elevating and idealizing their "führer", the mob actually elevates and idealizes itself; in his ascendance they find hope, in his manifest illness – curative solace and a legitimization of their own collective insanity.

The malignant narcissist invents and then projects a false, fictitious, self for the world to fear, or to admire. He maintains a tenuous grasp on reality to start with and this is further exacerbated by the trappings of power. The narcissist's grandiose self-delusions and fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience are supported by real life authority and the narcissist's predilection to surround himself with obsequious sycophants.

The narcissist's personality is so precariously balanced that he cannot tolerate even a hint of criticism and disagreement. Most narcissists are paranoid and suffer from ideas of reference (the delusion that they are being mocked or discussed when they are not). Thus, narcissists often regard themselves as "victims of persecution".

The narcissistic leader fosters and encourages a personality cult with all the hallmarks of an institutional religion: priesthood, rites, rituals, temples, worship, catechism, mythology. The leader is this religion's ascetic saint. He monastically denies himself earthly pleasures (or so he claims) in order to be able to dedicate himself fully to his calling.

The narcissistic leader is a monstrously inverted Jesus, sacrificing his life and denying himself so that his people - or humanity at large - should benefit. By surpassing and suppressing his humanity, the narcissistic leader became a distorted version of Nietzsche's "superman".

Many narcissistic and psychopathic leaders are the hostages of self-imposed rigid ideologies. They fancy themselves Platonic "philosopher-kings". Lacking empathy, they regard their subjects as a manufacturer does his raw materials, or as the abstracted collateral damage in vast historical processes (to prepare an omelet, one must break eggs, as their favorite saying goes).

But being a-human or super-human also means being a-sexual and a-moral.

In this restricted sense, narcissistic leaders are post-modernist and moral relativists. They project to the masses an androgynous figure and enhance it by engendering the adoration of nudity and all things "natural" - or by strongly repressing these feelings. But what they refer to as "nature" is not natural at all.

The narcissistic leader invariably proffers an aesthetic of decadence and evil carefully orchestrated and artificial - though it is not perceived this way by him or by his followers. Narcissistic leadership is about reproduced copies, not about originals. It is about the manipulation of symbols - not about veritable atavism or true conservatism.

In short: narcissistic leadership is about theatre, not about life. To enjoy the spectacle (and be subsumed by it), the cultish leader demands the suspension of judgment, and the attainment of depersonalization and de-realization. Catharsis is tantamount, in this narcissistic dramaturgy, to self-annulment.

Narcissism is nihilistic not only operationally, or ideologically. Its very language and narratives are nihilistic. Narcissism is conspicuous nihilism - and the cult's leader serves as a role model, annihilating the Man, only to re-appear as a pre-ordained and irresistible force of nature.

Narcissistic leadership often poses as a rebellion against the "old ways": against the hegemonic culture, the upper classes, the established religions, the superpowers, the corrupt order. Narcissistic movements are puerile, a reaction to narcissistic injuries inflicted upon a narcissistic (and rather psychopathic) toddler nation-state, or group, or upon the leader.

Minorities or "others" - often arbitrarily selected - constitute a perfect, easily identifiable, embodiment of all that is "wrong". They are accused of being old, of being eerily disembodied, cosmopolitan, a part of the establishment, of being "decadent". They are hated on religious and socio-economic grounds, or because of their race, sexual orientation, or origin. They are different, they are narcissistic (they feel and act as morally superior), they are defenceless, they are credulous, they are adaptable (and thus can be co-opted to collaborate in their own destruction). They are the perfect hate figure, a foil. Narcissists thrive on hatred and pathological envy.

This is precisely the source of the fascination with Hitler, diagnosed by Erich Fromm - together with Stalin - as a malignant narcissist. He was an inverted human. His unconscious was his conscious. He acted out our most repressed drives, fantasies, and wishes.

Hitler provided us with a glimpse of the horrors that lie beneath the veneer, the barbarians at our personal gates, and what it was like before we invented civilization. Hitler forced us all through a time warp and many did not emerge. He was not the devil. He was one of us. He was what Arendt aptly called the banality of evil. Just an ordinary, mentally disturbed, failure, a member of a mentally disturbed and failing nation, who lived through disturbed and failing times. He was the perfect mirror, a channel, a voice, and the very depth of our souls.

The narcissistic leader prefers the sparkle and glamour of well-orchestrated illusions to the tedium and method of real accomplishments. His reign is all smoke and mirrors, devoid of substance, consisting of mere appearances and mass delusions.

In the aftermath of his regime - the narcissistic leader having died, been deposed, or voted out of office - it all unravels. The tireless and constant prestidigitation ceases and the entire edifice crumbles. What looked like an economic miracle turns out to have been a fraud-laced bubble. Loosely-held empires disintegrate. Laboriously assembled business conglomerates go to pieces. "Earth shattering" and "revolutionary" scientific discoveries and theories are discredited. Social experiments end in mayhem.

As their end draws near, narcissistic-psychopathic leaders act out, lash out, erupt. They attack with equal virulence and ferocity compatriots, erstwhile allies, neighbors, and foreigners.

It is important to understand that the use of violence must be ego-syntonic. It must accord with the self-image of the narcissist. It must abet and sustain his grandiose fantasies and feed his sense of entitlement. It must conform with the narcissistic narrative.

All populist, charismatic leaders believe that they have a "special connection" with the "people": a relationship that is direct, almost mystical, and transcends the normal channels of communication (such as the legislature or the media). Thus, a narcissist who regards himself as the benefactor of the poor, a member of the common folk, the representative of the disenfranchised, the champion of the dispossessed against the corrupt elite, is highly unlikely to use violence at first.

The pacific mask crumbles when the narcissist has become convinced that the very people he purported to speak for, his constituency, his grassroots fans, the prime sources of his narcissistic supply, have turned against him. At first, in a desperate effort to maintain the fiction underlying his chaotic personality, the narcissist strives to explain away the sudden reversal of sentiment. "The people are being duped by (the media, big industry, the military, the elite, etc.)", "they don't really know what they are doing", "following a rude awakening, they will revert to form", etc.

When these flimsy attempts to patch a tattered personal mythology fail, the narcissist is injured. Narcissistic injury inevitably leads to narcissistic rage and to a terrifying display of unbridled aggression. The pent-up frustration and hurt translate into devaluation. That which was previously idealized is now discarded with contempt and hatred.

This primitive defense mechanism is called "splitting". To the narcissist, things and people are either entirely bad (evil) or entirely good. He projects onto others his own shortcomings and negative emotions, thus becoming a totally good object. A narcissistic leader is likely to justify the butchering of his own people by claiming that they intended to assassinate him, undo the revolution, devastate the economy, harm the nation or the country, etc.

The "small people", the "rank and file", the "loyal soldiers" of the narcissist - his flock, his nation, his employees - they pay the price. The disillusionment and disenchantment are agonizing. The process of reconstruction, of rising from the ashes, of overcoming the trauma of having been deceived, exploited and manipulated - is drawn-out. It is difficult to trust again, to have faith, to love, to be led, to collaborate. Feelings of shame and guilt engulf the erstwhile followers of the narcissist. This is his sole legacy: a massive post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

APPENDIX: Strong Men and Political Theatres - The "Being There" Syndrome

"I came here to see a country, but what I find is a theater ... In appearances, everything happens as it does everywhere else. There is no difference except in the very foundation of things."

(de Cusine, writing about Russia in the mid-19th century)

Four decades ago, the Polish-American-Jewish author, Jerzy Kosinski, wrote the book "Being There". It describes the election to the presidency of the United States of a simpleton, a gardener, whose vapid and trite pronouncements are taken to be sagacious and penetrating insights into human affairs. The "Being There Syndrome" is now manifest throughout the world: from Russia (Putin) to the United States (Obama).

Given a high enough level of frustration, triggered by recurrent, endemic, and systemic failures in all spheres of policy, even the most resilient democracy develops a predilection to "strong men", leaders whose self-confidence, sangfroid, and apparent omniscience all but "guarantee" a change of course for the better.

These are usually people with a thin resume, having accomplished little prior to their ascendance. They appear to have erupted on the scene from nowhere. They are received as providential messiahs precisely because they are unencumbered with a discernible past and, thus, are ostensibly unburdened by prior affiliations and commitments. Their only duty is to the future. They are a-historical: they have no history and they are above history.

Indeed, it is precisely this apparent lack of a biography that qualifies these leaders to represent and bring about a fantastic and grandiose future. They act as a blank screen upon which the multitudes project their own traits, wishes, personal biographies, needs, and yearnings.

The more these leaders deviate from their initial promises and the more they fail, the dearer they are to the hearts of their constituents: like them, their new-chosen leader is struggling, coping, trying, and failing and, like them, he has his shortcomings and vices. This affinity is endearing and captivating. It helps to form a shared psychosis (folies-a-plusieurs) between ruler and people and fosters the emergence of an hagiography.

The propensity to elevate narcissistic or even psychopathic personalities to power is most pronounced in countries that lack a democratic tradition (such as China, Russia, or the nations that inhabit the territories that once belonged to Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire).

Cultures and civilizations which frown upon individualism and have a collectivist tradition, prefer to install "strong collective leaderships" rather than "strong men". Yet, all these polities maintain a theatre of democracy, or a theatre of "democratically-reached consensus" (Putin calls it: "sovereign democracy"). Such charades are devoid of essence and proper function and are replete and concurrent with a personality cult or the adoration of the party in power.

In most developing countries and nations in transition, "democracy" is an empty word. Granted, the hallmarks of democracy are there: candidate lists, parties, election propaganda, a plurality of media, and voting. But its quiddity is absent. The democratic principles are institutions are being consistently hollowed out and rendered mock by election fraud, exclusionary policies, cronyism, corruption, intimidation, and collusion with Western interests, both commercial and political.

The new "democracies" are thinly-disguised and criminalized plutocracies (recall the Russian oligarchs), authoritarian regimes (Central Asia and the Caucasus), or puppeteered heterarchies (Macedonia, Bosnia, and Iraq, to mention three recent examples).

The new "democracies" suffer from many of the same ills that afflict their veteran role models: murky campaign finances; venal revolving doors between state administration and private enterprise; endemic corruption, nepotism, and cronyism; self-censoring media; socially, economically, and politically excluded minorities; and so on. But while this malaise does not threaten the foundations of the United States and France - it does imperil the stability and future of the likes of Ukraine, Serbia, and Moldova, Indonesia, Mexico, and Bolivia.

Many nations have chosen prosperity over democracy. Yes, the denizens of these realms can't speak their mind or protest or criticize or even joke lest they be arrested or worse - but, in exchange for giving up these trivial freedoms, they have food on the table, they are fully employed, they receive ample health care and proper education, they save and spend to their hearts' content.

In return for all these worldly and intangible goods (popularity of the leadership which yields political stability; prosperity; security; prestige abroad; authority at home; a renewed sense of nationalism, collective and community), the citizens of these countries forgo the right to be able to criticize the regime or change it once every four years. Many insist that they have struck a good bargain - not a Faustian one.

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